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House of Meetings, by Martin Amis

From Russia with loathing

By Catherine Merridale

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This is definitely a book that should not be judged by a cover that promises Gulag prison-camp romance. The blurb-writers also celebrate the discovery of "new and remarkably fertile fictional territory", as if the picking-over of old bones, of human degradation, could somehow be the literary world's new black. Martin Amis's exploration of state violence, futile brutality, loss and despair is neither a love story nor the harbinger of some brisk-selling new genre. Indeed, it is so uncompromisingly bleak that only dedicated readers will stay with the tale, though in that darkness also lies its truth.

The story is narrated by a savage old man (we never learn his name), and every page reeks of his anger. He is angry with the state that ruined his life, sending him off to war on Russia's western front and teaching him how to rape ("I lost my virginity to a Silesian housewife, in a roadside ditch"). He is angry that the same government then snatched him from the woman he worshipped to slave in Norlag, one of the string of labour camps looped round the Soviet far north. He even appears angry with his stepdaughter, an American called Venus, to whom the book is addressed, for in its unsparing detail the text itself is violent.

Amis brings the rhetorical trick off to perfection, writing as if the paragraphs were slaps across the reader's face. Gulag survivors, real ones, tend not to talk so graphically, sparing their families and themselves; but they are the successes, since they are not dead. Our man's message is that redemption is impossible.

Much of the story circles round two coincidences, both dating from the prison years. The first is that the narrator's younger brother, Lev, turns up in his own camp, condemned also as a socially-hostile element, a "political". This is the good news, in surreal Gulag terms, because it means that the older man has something to protect, even a new reason to live. The bad news is that Lev has married Zoya, that yearned-for woman, and nothing will ever be right for his brother again. All three lives will unravel in the coming years, but it is left to our narrator to die in the deepest hell.

Freedom - the liberation of the camps in 1956 - can never heal this man, and nor can affluence. He makes money, first as a semi-legal tradesman in Moscow, then a weapons engineer, but wealth has no power over his heart. Even escape, first to the soothing sounds of an English girlfriend's language and then, more permanently, to America, provides no solace.

Human beings cannot evade their legacy of pain, in this man's view; even Americans find ways of torturing themselves. Venus, we learn, was treated for anorexia, inflicting on herself the slave's starvation. But "it's not just the young. There's a western phenomenon called the mid-life crisis. Very often it is heralded by divorce. What history might have done to you, you bring about on purpose: separation from woman and child. Don't tell me that such men aren't tasting the ancient flavours of death and defeat."

The analogy will be a controversial one, and might surprise, even offend, survivors of the Soviet Union's grandiose era of violence. I wonder, too, if it is not also an echo of the author's exclusion from the pain that he has made his subject in this and other novels.

Amis, after all, is a comfortable member of the English literary class; he cannot speak with what he calls the guttural voice of Russia. He

can only invoke its shadow, but he does a rare job of that. We read, for instance, that Russia is dying. Familiar statistics describe its rising mortality and falling birth rates; the population may well halve in 50 years. Our narrator sees a collective failure of desire, a procreative strike, combined with complete moral collapse.

There never was a reckoning with Stalin's violence, no massive court case, no apologies. "The conscience, I suspect, is a vital organ," we read. "And when it goes, you go." Bleak though this is, the conclusion cuts to the heart of Stalin's legacy.

This is a short book, fewer than 200 pages, and packing it with every Soviet atrocity since 1941 is an ambitious feat, not always perfectly achieved. Some passages read like historical notes, and Amis's debt to Anne Applebaum's superb *Gulag* is excessively clear. There is too much, sometimes; the book bursts with its facts. For all that, the result is brilliant. "Closure is a greasy little word," we read. "The truth is that nobody ever gets over anything." Writing as he does for a society that insists on uplifting endings, spiritual hope, our narrator, ruined forever by brutality, is entitled to his anger, and Amis to his invocation of its endlessness.

Catherine Merridale, professor of contemporary history at Queen Mary, London, is the author of *'Ivan's War: the Red Army 1939-1945'* (Faber)

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